

**Unifying Qualities in Romanticism**

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Romanticism is such complex and diverse artistic movement that one cannot discern a singular definitive quality (Viault, 1990). Eric Newton (1962) claimed that critics have been unable to establish a common factor in Romantic art. To be sure, there was no singular, universal approach (Linduff, Schultz, and Wilkins, 2005). The range of subjects was too diverse to be definitive (Galitz, 2004). The artwork itself varied stylistically and regionally (Wikipedia, 2012). In the lack of one clear common factor, Romanticism is classified by its ideologies (Galitz, 2004). According to Linduff, et al. (2005), Romanticism is an attitude of mind. It stressed the subjective view of the artist (Linduff, et al., 2005), and those artists rejected the rules placed upon them by previous art movements (Wikipedia, 2012).

With all the complexity and variety in Romantic art, how does one go about classifying that art as such? What is it that brought those artists, independent and rebellious as they were, together under one movement? What were the unifying qualities of Romanticism?

### **Origins**

Romanticism was a movement in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and America (Linduff et al., 2005). It was initially defined as an aesthetic in literary criticism, but became recognizable as an important artistic movement by the early 1800s (Galitz, 2004). Romanticism peaked from roughly 1800 to 1840 (Wikipedia, 2012), but its impact on art is evidenced throughout the nineteenth century.

Romanticism developed on the heels of the French Revolution of 1789 as a response to the disillusionment with Enlightenment values of reason and order (Galitz, 2004). According to Eric Newton (1962), the movement was not so much a discovery of

Romanticism, but a conversion to it. By the end of the eighteenth century, artists had grown weary of the Enlightenment's emphasis on the supremacy of reason in human affairs (Viault, 1990). The Western world was being engulfed in a tedium of reason, industrialism, and scientific rationalization, from which Romanticism offered a respite (Wikipedia, 2012).

Neoclassicism retained influence as an art movement into the nineteenth century, but Romanticism emerged to challenge the Neoclassical style and its belief that art should express universal truths (Linduff et al., 2005). Romanticism rebelled against the formalism of Neoclassical composition and the rigid rules Neoclassicism applied to the creative process (Viault, 1990).

While Romanticism is generally considered the antithesis to Neoclassicism, it was shaped largely by painters trained in formal Neoclassical studios—particularly students of Jacques-Louis David in France (Galitz, 1990). Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the most famous student of David, was generally characterized as a defender of classical values and considered the last Neoclassical painter (Pioch, 2002). Such a simple account, however, is inaccurate. Ingres initially rejected the lessons of David. He ultimately returned to Neoclassical values in his work, but not until he had laid the foundation for the “emotive expression” of Romanticism (Harris & Zucker, n.d.b, para. 2). Even Théodore Géricault depicted a Neoclassical mastery of the athletic nude form in his quintessential romantic painting, *Raft of the Medusa* (Crow, Lukacher, Nochlin, Phillips, & Pohl, F, 2007).

Because of the French Academies' deeply rooted Neoclassical traditions, Romantic painting was not taught formally there until 1863. As such, Romantic painting

had a more difficult time establishing itself in France than other European countries. However, history paintings that propagandized the Napoleon regime in the first two decades of the 1800s helped Romanticism to gain a foothold in France. Politically themed history painting remained a focus of French Romantic painting even after the time of Napoleon (Wikipedia, 2012).

### **Technique and Media**

Romantic artists rejected the goal of photographic accuracy, instead emphasizing imagination and emotion. They idealized color as a powerfully communicative element of art. Romanticism held a high regard for observation, both relaxed, contemplative reflection and keen examination. The Romantic tradition of observation, along with artists' acute awareness of color, created compelling artistic expression. Such emphasis on observation and color contributed to significant achievements in painting (Vogt, 1973).

Paint was the preferred medium of Romantic artists. While there exists some sculpture from the period, painting was generally favored because artists disliked the inexpressive nature of sculpture and its affiliation with Neoclassicism (Vogt, 1973). Artists had a particular distaste for marble because it was not conducive to expansive gestures. They found marble's lack of color cold and uninspiring (Wikipedia, 2012). Vogt (1973) noted that Romantics delighted in painting "shadowy depths and twilight moods," which sculpture was unable convey (p. 87). The sculpture that was produced during the period focused on transformation and metamorphosis (Vogt, 1973).

### **Ideologies**

The most central notion of Romanticism, that which unified so many disparate styles and themes, was the originality of the artist (Galitz, 2004). Romanticism revolutionized the creative process by ascribing the highest value to an individual's personal and imaginative reaction to the world around them. Romantic artists asserted the human imagination was at its best when left unchecked. The individuality of each artist as a creative and expressive personality was more important than adhering to a homogenous visual style, and emotional expression was paramount (Linduff et al., 2005).

A result of the romantic esteem for the heroic individual and artist was that individual imagination became the critical authority. Such a doctrine liberated Romanticism from classical notions of form, and thus allowed free expression to coalesce as a definitive quality in Romantic art (Wikipedia, 2012).

One facet of artists' emphasis on the individual and subjective rather than the rationalism of the eighteenth century is exhibited in the portraiture of the period. Portraits were traditionally a utilitarian record of individual appearance, but painted by the brush of a Romantic artist, they expressed a range of psychological and emotional states (Galitz, 2004).

### **Themes**

While reason dominated the previous period associated with Neoclassical art and The Enlightenment (Linduff et al., 2005), Romantics emphasized feelings and emotions, faith and intuition, and imagination and spontaneity (Viault, 1990). They preferred imaginary and exotic subjects to didactic Neoclassical history paintings (Galitz, 2004),

and their distrust of rationalism inspired the expression of spontaneous, individual feelings (Linduff et al., 2005). Artists moved away from the classical approach to drawing and proportion in favor of a more expressive and gestural technique (Wikipedia, 2012). Newton (1962) claimed that subjectivism asserted itself on the objective sensibility of Neoclassical art.

### **Subjects from Literature and the Exotic**

Romantic artists embraced the exotic and unfamiliar (Wikipedia, 2012). Many artists depicted scenes from the Middle East & North Africa, or scenes inspired by literature such as the works of Byron or Shakespeare. There was an escapist attitude behind these works (Galitz, 2004), as if the artists sought to forget the banality of the Western world and its modern rationalization and industrialism.

It was discussed earlier that, despite general categorization as a Neoclassical artist, Ingres was, in actuality, a bridge between movements. His most Romantic work, *La Grande Odalisque*, is a prime example of Orientalism. (It must be noted that, in the context of Romantic art, Orientalism referred to Middle Eastern and North African subjects.) *Odalisque* caused a scandal when it was first exhibited at the Salon in Paris because it featured a female nude. A nude Venus was acceptable, but this was a woman from a harem. Ingres bucked classical accuracy of anatomy for greater expression of sensuality. The model's torso is so elongated that critics complained she had extra vertebrae. Her left leg is in an anatomically impossible position, yet it conveys a languidness that underscores the sensuality of the work. *La Grande Odalisque* is not an accurate account of a harem, but a construction that caters to the fascination with exotic luxury sparked by French colonialism (Harris & Zucker, n.d.b).

If Ingres was an unwitting Romantic painter, Eugene Delacroix was definitively one. His painting, *Death of Sardanapalus*, exemplified both Orientalism and subjects derived from literature. Delacroix's painting was inspired by Byron's tragic historical play, *Sardanapalus*. The scene depicts Assyrian ruler Sardanapalus on his own funeral pyre. Instead of facing a shameful defeat at the hands of invaders, he chose to burn himself and all his belongings, including horses and concubines (Artble, 2012). Sardanapalus looks down indifferently from the top of his bed as soldiers kill the women. Delacroix eschewed all classical ideals with this painting, shocking the French public at the time of its exhibition. Rather than the carefully constructed Neoclassical space, Delacroix crammed the picture plane full of bodies and objects (Harris & Zucker, n.d.a). The scene of Sardanapalus' death is not the heroic suicide of [Socrates](#) (Linduff et al., 2005), but selfish and callous.

### **Fear, Death, and the Irrational**

In rebellion against their Neoclassical forebears, Romantic painters valued emotions and intuition over reason (Linduff et al., 2005). They believed aesthetic experience was derived from strong emotions (Wikipedia, 2012), and had particular interest in the mysterious, irrational, and the visionary (Linduff et al., 2005). Such emphasis is evidenced in the trend of painting concerned with nightmares, death, and fear (Vogt, 1973). Artists Fuseli, David, and Goya exemplify the Romantic fascination with nightmares, death, and fear, in three paintings, respectively.

Johann Heinrich Fuseli once said that dreams were "one of the most unexplored regions of art." In his painting *The Nightmare*, a young girl is depicted in the terrifying, and almost ecstatic, throes of a nightmare. The Goblin squatting on her chest represents

the oppressiveness of the dream, and the stallion looming over her embodies the wildness and violence of the psyche at its most primal level (Brown, 2001).

With *Death of Marat*, Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David temporarily slipped into the Romantic genre. He depicted the murder of French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat with all the horror and violence that would make any Romantic proud. Marat was pictured after being stabbed in his bath, where he often worked. The bathtub setting amplifies the carnage as the water turns bloody and his towel becomes a funeral shroud (Vogt, 1973).

Francisco Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808*, according to Vogt (1973), veers visually between aggression and passivity. Goya's history paintings focused on the corrupt aspects of his time (Vogt, 1973). This painting depicts the execution of Spanish men by Napoleon's soldiers. The sheer scale of the life-sized painting pulls the viewer into a moment of horror and desperation. The soldiers are dehumanized by the identical repetition that presents them as machines (Elements and principles of design, n.d.). In contrast, the man about to be shot is individualized by color and lighting, making him more human and relatable. The emphasis on him as he stands, Christ-like, creates an immediate intimacy. The viewer is forced to participate in the scene as the man, consigned and terrified, faces his death.

Underscoring the changing themes was a marked compositional shift in Romantic art. Evidenced in the works mentioned above is an employment of asymmetrical balance and imposing negative space, rather than the refined balance of Neoclassicism. One will notice in all three paintings that the upper halves of the compositions are empty. The weight of the void threatens to overtake the main subjects of the works, expressing a

sense of futility and terror, as each subject is lost into unknown worlds of nightmare and death (Vogt, 1973). The effect is even more apparent in comparison to the refined balance and stable use of space in David's classical *Death of Socrates*, or Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer*.

### **Untamed Nature**

The nineteenth century aesthetic was centered on the sublime, specifically that which was evoked by violent and terrifying images of nature (Galitz, 2004). Romantic artists focused on trepidation, horror, and awe in the face of the untamed wild (Wikipedia, 2012). Wild animals held a certain fascination for romantic painters as representation of both a force of nature and a metaphor for human behavior. Galitz (2004) argued, "images of wild, unbridled animals evoked primal states that stirred the Romantic imagination" (para. 5), illustrated in [\*The Start of the Race of the Riderless Horses\*](#) (1820) by Horace Vernet.

The ideology that the sublime was invoked by awe and terror is evidenced in French and British paintings of shipwrecks and other expressions of man's struggle against the power of nature. Nature's uncontrollable power and propensity for cataclysm offered an alternative to the ordered world of the enlightenment (Galitz, 2004). The romantics canonized the concept of struggle and had a particular affinity for the struggle of man against the overwhelming forces of nature (Linduff et al., 2005). After Géricault painted *Raft of the Medusa*, the depiction of apocalyptic events became a popular trend in history painting. Artists focused on disasters caused by divine wrath or extreme natural events (Wikipedia, 2012), such as in Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*.

### **The Romantic Landscape**

Landscape painting was first elevated to a high genre of painting during the Romantic period (Harris & Zucker, n.d.c). Painters used landscapes as a means to express personal thoughts and emotions, as well as to communicate a sense of the sublime through the contemplation of nature (Linduff et al., 2005). The Romantic sensibilities first emerged in landscape paintings around 1760 when British artists began painting wild landscapes, storms, and gothic architecture (Wikipedia, 2012). German painters also embraced such themes in landscape paintings, exemplified in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Abbey in the Oakwood*.

A group of painters known as the Hudson River School were the most prominent American landscape painters (Wikipedia, 2012). They depicted the American landscape as a god-given paradise and celebrated a nationalistic spirit. Initially, many nineteenth century American artists studied in Europe and brought Neoclassical styles and themes with them to America. The intellectual subjects of Neoclassicism, however, held little appeal for the American people (Linduff et al., 2005). American painters gave some attention to old world ruins that communicated Gothic feelings of death and decay and the Romantic idea that nature would remain after the fleeting institutions of man. More often, however, American artists focused on distinctly American scenes in an effort to differentiate themselves from European artists (Wikipedia, 2012). By the 1820s, the American landscape was the preferred subject for American artists (Linduff et al., 2005). According to Linduff et al. (2005), "Landscape seemed an especially democratic art, for its meaning was immediately accessible to the public, without scholarly reference" (p. 429).

## History Painting

A mark of Romanticism's rebellion against Neoclassicism is evidenced in the rejection of classical scenes in favor of medievalism. The Romantics appreciated any aspect of art or nature that they perceived as medieval. [Style troubadour](#), a subset of Romanticism, was a type of French history painting that often depicted medieval and Renaissance themes (Wikipedia, 2012). Additionally, there was a large emphasis on national traditions in Romantic painting that contributed to the development of nationalism in Europe during the nineteenth century (Viault, 1990).

Another theme central to Romantic art was the ideal of revolution. Many Romantic paintings depicted for the first time sensational themes and political commentary that would become increasingly common in the history of art (Linduff et al., 2005). The early part of the Romantic era was set against a backdrop of political and social unrest spawned by the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* and Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* both depicted current events, signifying a change in history painting to contemporarily relevant historical scenes, rather than religious or mythological depictions (Wikipedia, 2012).

### **Raft of the Medusa**

In the depiction of man's struggle against the overwhelming powers of nature, it was common for Romantic artists to paint ships in danger at sea. Vogt (1973) speculated, "they reflect not only a basic feeling of political insecurity, but also the threat posed by the 'advances' of civilization" (p. 110). One of the most significant works of the era, *Raft of the Medusa*, embodies such qualities. It expresses not only man's vulnerability against

nature, but also man as a victim of man's own brutality (Harris & Zucker, n.d.c). *Raft of the Medusa* marks a change in history painting because it depicts a "needless modern tragedy" as a historic event (Linduff et al., 2005, p. 416).

In 1816, the *Medusa* wrecked off the West African coast (Brown, 2001). The *Medusa's* captain, whose position was received from aristocratic connections, not earned (Linduff et al., 2005), refused the advice of experienced naval officers under him (Crow et al., 2007). The captain and senior officers took the lifeboats, leaving 150 people to a hastily built raft (Linduff et al., 2005). The captain then abandoned the raft when the crew cut the towline so the lifeboats could make it quickly to shore (Brown, 2001).

The 150 raft passengers were left to float at sea for 13 days on a makeshift raft, enduring numerous horrors (Brown, 2001). There were so many people on the raft that the passengers were initially forced to stand with the water at their waists. The weight was too much for the raft to float on the surface. After six days adrift, the number of passengers was reduced to 30 by storms, mutiny, accidents, and suicides. Those left resorted to cannibalism to stay alive. The strongest passengers killed the ones closest to death in order to stretch the provisions (Crow et al., 2007).

The passengers briefly spotted the *Argus*, another ship from the original convoy, but it was too far away to see them. By the time the *Argus* found the raft, only 15 passengers survived (Brown, 2001). The wounded, emaciated survivors were taken to Senegal, where five more died. Only 10 of the original 150 made it back to France (Crow et al., 2007)

The Parisian government tried to cover up the story, but survivor Henri Savigny, the ship's doctor, published his first-hand account of the event. Savigny was Géricault's

main source for the painting (Brown, 2001). *Raft of the Medusa* is at once a record of the tragedy and an indictment on the government responsible for the event. Traditionally, artworks that made a political statement were propagandizing the existing regime. Here, Géricault is critical (Linduff et al., 2005).

Géricault's initial intent was to depict the most horrific incidents from the raft, but instead chose to immortalize the moment the survivors first saw the *Argus* (Brown, 2001). No one knows if the ship has seen them, but the group rallies into one final action to attract the ship's attention (Crow et al., 2007). Harris and Zucker (n.d.c) noted that the collection of figures become one singular mass with a common intent. The passengers had dragged themselves from exhaustion and despair. Survivors had climbed over dead bodies to signal the ship. The slouching, resigned figure on the lower left, however, recognizes the attempt as pointless—the other ship is a dot on the horizon (Brown 2001).

Crow et al. (2007) claimed, “the finished painting is a complex hybrid of the hyper-traditional (a centralized pyramidal arrangement of nude figures) and the unexpected (building it on a pitching sea with a cast of contemporary, semi-anonymous victims)” (p. 71). Géricault created a drama typical of Romantic painting, but he adapted classical visual devices to express a theme of conflict. The influence of earlier art periods and Géricault's classical training is apparent in the precision of anatomical form. The dramatic gestures reflect his study of Michelangelo and Rubens. The use of chiaroscuro, diagonal composition, and agitated poses allude to Baroque styles of painting (Linduff et al., 2005). Brown (2001) stated: “futility and irony infuse the entire composition; for example the shirt-waving figure's muscular back is a cruel parody of the classical statue fragment known as the [Belvedere Torso](#), long admired by the academics” (p.111).

*Raft of the Medusa* presents the subject as an idea, not an accurate account of the event. In reality, the bodies were starved and disfigured with wounds and sun poisoning. Instead, Géricault depicted the athletic male nude on a larger-than-life scale (Crow et al., 2007). The figures are classically inspired heroic nudes rather than emaciated bodies, but Géricault painted them with a greenish-gray pallor after studying corpses at the Paris morgue (Brown, 2001). He added extra figures for compositional purposes. Even though the raft had lost 135 passengers, the survivors are crowded in the composition (Crow et al., 2007).

The painting hangs at a low level in the Louvre. The proximity of the painting to the viewer makes the painting even more impactful. The image is arranged in a way that pushes the figures forward in the viewer's direction. The diagonal tilt of the composition and the precarious jumble of bodies creates the impression that the figures will spill out of the pictorial plane. Amidst the frenetically seething bodies and the turbulent waves, an open hand of the unconscious youth extends toward the viewer. The gesture is tender and vulnerable, and it humanizes the unconscious form. It invites the viewer into the painting, and demands he or she engages with the painting on an emotional and personal level (Crow et al., 2007).

*Raft of the Medusa* demonstrates a number of the qualities that galvanized the Romantic Movement. Its destabilized composition is arranged on dramatic diagonal lines, it represents a strong sense of emotion, and depicts the struggle of man against nature (Harris & Zucker, n.d.c). Truly, the *Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault is a prodigious example from the Romantic period. It is beautiful in craft, and its emotional impact is a powerful one.

### **Conclusion**

There were a number of subjects and themes in Romantic art. The visual style varied with each artist. Underneath all the diverse elements of Romanticism was a sense of independence and rebellion that rejected classical values. The Romantic artists forged a new creative process that honored emotional intuition as the ultimate guide to aesthetic experience.

The impact of the Romantic Movement is still in evidence in art today. While Romanticism was not in itself modern, it marked the break with traditional artistic values and processes that would lead to modern art. The Romantic love of nature and rebelliousness against artistic convention paved the way for Impressionism later in the nineteenth century (Viault, 1990). Newton (1962) asserted, "Romanticism is an attitude of mind in which any human being, at any time, may, by virtue of his humanity, indulge: but 'Romantic' can only be applied with confidence to certain periods or races in which the same attitude of mind finds no hindrance to its means of expression" (p.12).

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